Welcome to our first opportunity to study the portion privately via technology. I hope that you will find the material meaningful. The page numbers refer to Etz Hayim, the maroon-colored humash that we utilize.

This Shabbat we once again utilize two Torot. The first reading is taken from the book of Exodus. The most known part of the reading we do not experience this year, as it is in the middle, and we are in the first year of the triennial cycle. That is the famous story of the Golden Calf. You will have to patiently hang on until next year, although you are most warmly invited to study Torah further on Shabbat, or any day if you desire.

The portion begins with a reading that might be familiar to some: the census and the poll tax. This was read on February 22 under the title of Shabbat Shekalim. I spoke of this at that time, and with your permission, will move on further in the reading.

What an incredible coincidence (perhaps not?) that the reading continues with instructions regarding WASHING HANDS. One could never plan this way. In 30:18(p. 525), we read that they are to construct a wash basin(laver) out of copper. Aaron and his sons are to wash their hands and feet there that they may not die. When they approach the altar to serve, they shall wash their hands and feet, that they may not die. The questions to ponder are:

1. Why would washing hands and feet prevent their death?
2. Is this for spiritual or hygienic purposes? How do you justify your answer?
3. Do any vestiges of this practice remain in use today in Jewish ritual? (Obviously they do, or I would not ask the question)

The portion continues in verse 22 with a precise formula for compounding the anointing oil: myrrh, cinnamon, cane, cassia and olive oil. It is rubbed on all of the elements within the sacred portable ark. We are then told that whatever touches the shall be consecrated. You shall also anoint Aaron and his sons, consecrating them to serve Me as priests. Questions to ponder:

1. Why the need for a precise anointing oil?
2. What is so special about it that anything, or anyone, that touches it become holy?
3. Is holiness transferrable?

The portion then provides a precise formula for incense: equal portions of the herbs stacte (balsam or persimmon resin), onycha (onyx), galbanum (a gum resin) and frankincense. What would they do with it? It was added every morning and evening to the altar. Questions to ponder:

1. What is the purpose of the incense?
2. Might we liken it to various room scents that we use in our homes? What odors might the holy incense be masking?
3. Why would you need incense if you are outdoors?

The last steps needed for the construction of the mishkan (the portable sanctuary) are skilled specialists who can work with precious metals: gold, silver and copper; with precious stones; to carve wood. Apparently no matter how skilled any human might be, there is one
element lacking that God provides: Divine inspiration. God selects Bezalel as chief. In an interesting note, when the State of Israel wanted to create an arts school, they named it the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design. Bezalel’s assistant will be Oholiab. God endows both of them with the necessary skills to finish the project. Obviously two people are insufficient to finish, so the Divine inspiration must include the ability to select the right team for the tasks.

The final part of the Torah portion includes a serious comment from God about one commandment, the Shabbat. For those comfortable with the Hebrew, I encourage you to look at verses 16-17. It may look familiar to you. Questions to ponder:

1. Why the severity of language from God regarding Shabbat observance? In other words, why do you think God deems the Shabbat so important?
2. The Shabbat is referred to in verses 13 and 17 as a sign (Hebrew: ot). What might it be a sign of, or for?
3. Does the Shabbat remain important in this day and age? If yes, how is it important to you?
4. Many consider one of the greatest gifts that Judaism presented the world was a day of rest. Why do you think some suggest this?

The Maftir (Second Torah)

Numbers 19:1-22; pp. 880-883

Here we are introduced to a most peculiar ritual, the law of the red heifer. In essence, a blemish-free, reddish cow is offered on the altar, burnt to ash. The ashes are then moved to a special place outside of the encampment. If one becomes impure, you are quarantined outside of the encampment for seven days. How might one become impure? By
contact with a corpse. So how does one become pure? The process is that a person who is pure shall mix fresh water with some of the ashes, and sprinkle it upon the impure person on day three and day seven. Then, on day seven the person washes their clothes and bathes, becoming pure by that evening. But here’s the kicker: anyone who touches the ashes becomes impure. Yes, that’s right: the pure person becomes impure, but only until that same evening. No, the pure, now impure person, does not have to undergo the seven-day ritual. Confusing indeed, but this was God’s command. How incredible that at this time, in this day, we read two portions about cleanliness. One is about hand washing, and the other about being quarantined due to impurity. There are no coincidences. Questions to ponder:

1. Why would coming into contact with the dead be the only way listed that creates impurity?
2. Why is purity so important to God?
3. Is the ritual about hygienic or spiritual practices?
4. Consider the Jewish calendar right now. Why are we reading about spiritual purity on this Shabbat? I know, it’s a tough question, but it is answerable.

Thank you for participating in our first distance Torah study. I hope that you found the material informative and meaningful. I welcome your comments, thoughts and question. Just email me at rabbi@tolols.org. Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Jeffrey Myers